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New Horizons In Education: Positive Education And Emerging Leadership Roles Of Counselors

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Abstract

Positive Psychology is a movement, which has grown so rapidly in the last decade driven by a concern for the systematic study of positive aspects of human development rather than mental disease. Happiness, positive traits, positive emotions and positive institutions are the prevalent research topics studied under the name of positive psychology with empirical validations about their positive effects on self enhancement and prevention from mental illness. Positive Psychology has quite extensive fields of application in business administration, law (forensic psychology), clinical psychology, counseling, health and education all concern about institutional and individual mechanisms that set the positive potentials of individuals into practice in order to be at their best. This article reviews conceptual foundations of positive psychology and how its principles are integrated in education holistically. The article proposes a system model where meso and micro level indicators of positive psychology/education interacts within an eco system where the role of school counselors as change agents becomes crucial. Mindsets and other potential barriers for the counselors are discussed along with resolution strategies.

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A Brief Review of Positive Psychology; From Mental Disorders to Mental Health

Psychology, which is as old as the human history as yet turned into a scientific discipline approximately a hundred years ago, use different rigorous approaches each of which contributed to the understanding of human nature. These approaches, until the beginning of the 21st century, prioritized into mental disorders, insufficiencies, deficits and treatments of disease. The medical approach, which focused on correcting the deficient or the weak, made its effect apparent in various fields of application as well. Clinicians developed treatment methods through studying affective, cognitive and behavioral disorders; family therapists put emphasis on bad relationships, conflict resolution and sexual problems; business organizations searched for the reasons and the consequences of negative states like stress,

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depression, conflict, slacking and alienation; forensic psychology dwelled into “crimino-genic risk factors”; environmentalists addressed detrimental effects of environmental stressors on human physiological systems; education suggested ‘rehabilitative’ models studying children with problems. A meta-analysis of the academic articles that were published between the years 1976 – 1994 strikingly evidence this widespread tendency. The results of this comprehensive research reveal that 46,380 articles are about depression, 36,851 articles are about anxiety and 5099 articles are about anger. The results also indicate that only 5000 articles are written about subjects like happiness, life satisfaction, hope and optimism (Luthans, 2002)

Ironically in most cases “healing” endeavors were highly linked with learning how to think feel and behave in positive ways for those who could not manage it before the correction process. When these positive states supposedly integrated with proper systems fostering “the good” in people, the treatment process was assumed to be successful. However when people with their impairments had accesses to these treatment methods their inner systems had already been so damaged that many of them even had very little or no chance of recovery.

This movement, which is devoted to the pathology of human psychology, has to face and even compete with a paradigm that was reshaped at the end of 1990’s with the claim that “it could not provide sufficient information that will make the normal life worth living”. In the contemporary period, the increasing complexity and multidimensional features of social structures and relationships drive the researchers to think more about mental health issues of “ordinary people” as preventions to mental illness. In this sense there has been quite attention-although not enough- being paid to protecting mental health along with the healing mental diseases in the scientific track of psychology. The concept of mental health points out the importance of the fact that ‘people’s efforts to explore and improve their strengths are as much as their efforts to remove their weaknesses’ to flourish individual and societal well being (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000)

Although the roots of these discussions and approaches that fall under Positive Psychology trace back to the happiness descriptions of Socrates, Plato and Epicures; they actually point the last of the three basic goals of psychology that were mentioned on scientific platforms before World War II: The first of these goals is to cure mental diseases, the second is to take the lives of individuals to a relatively better position and the last is to be able to take the individual and societal quality of life to better levels by bringing out strengths and existing potentials of individuals (Seligman, 1998).

This third goal of psychology, which was neglected for many years and which took inspiration from humanist philosophers like Maslow, Rogers and Fromm, was enlivened by Seligman who started his initiatives in 1998. Seligman being elected president of the American Psychological Association at that time used the opportunity to pieced together the individual efforts of researchers and academics who emphasized the importance of working on people’s strengths and virtues to explore the potential that resides within “normally functioning” people. The first Positive Psychology Summit was convened in 1999. The International Positive Psychology Conference that was organized in 2002 and then by the Journal of Positive Psychology that was first published in 2006 followed this. The first Positive Psychology course was introduced to academic curricula at Harvard University and then a world conference that brought together many academicians from all over the world took place (Ben-Shahar, 2007; Compton, 2005). All these initiatives prepared grounds for the ongoing process in which positive psychology has gained scientific recognition based on rigor research and neuro-scientific approach.

The Mission of Positive Psychology: To Extinguish the Fire or to Prevent It?

The early descriptions of positive psychology focus on happiness and ways to be happy. Later Seligman put forward the concept of ‘well-being’ in which a person can transfer his/her strong positive traits (strengths) and subjective experiences like optimism, hope, satisfaction and happiness to various fields of life and transform his/her environment to flourish (Cohn and Fredrickson, 2009). Generally positive psychology is described as the study of conditions and processes that contribute to the betterment of ordinary people (Peterson and Park, 2003; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson, 2005).

Positive Psychology approaches focus on finding ‘what goes well’ in humans, and developing and exploring strengths and virtues rather than correcting the weak. In spite of its intensive focus on the “positive” the movement

of positive psychology has no intention to denounce or ignore the contribution that medical psychology has made to the epistemology of mental diseases; on the contrary considers his own approaches complementary to the existing knowledge base. One of the most outstanding claims of positive psychology however, compares to traditional psychology approaches, is the underpinning of preventive and buffering functions of the relevant issues (like positive personal traits and learnt positive experiences) against mental and physical illnesses. In this respect being “positive” implies a proactive approach in applications. An example to proactive approach is while traditional therapies strive to cure (by also using the principles of positive therapy) patients who are already inflicted with mental illness (reactive approach), positive psychologists help normally functioning people to bring out or teach pertaining skills to get immunized against the potential risks of mental health. There is empirical evidence supporting this perspective. Optimism, hope and positive emotions decrease the likelihood of depression in later years of one’s life span (Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson, 2005). Similarly the results of numerous studies showed that optimistic people are less likely to be exposed to physical risk factors like cardiovascular disease as compared to pessimistic people (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich and Linkins 2009).

As very well known in the cases with therapies and medical science the effort and the cost of recovering a disease can be much more than the preventive measures. Thereof positive psychology implications in institutions could be of economic concern as it is a well being concern for communities and individuals.

Another feature of positive psychology-on the other hand- is that instead of showing “the best single way” of being in good condition, it provides information to people about the consequences of the choices they can make. A life condition that a person views as good may not be good for another person. This basic phenomenological problem regarding human psychology is also valid for positive psychology. However positive psychology plays an intervening role for those who make choices in daily life and this basic role of positive psychology can be termed “proactive intervention” which metaphorically addresses to prevent the fire before it breaks out.

Levels of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is considered to function at three distinct but interacting levels classified as subjective, individual and societal. Issues at subjective level include individual emotions and experiences like well being, happiness, satisfaction, optimism, hope, experience flow, creativity, self-efficacy, mindfulness and resilience. (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). At the individual level Positive psychology emphasize on traits that have also been discovered empirically to provide positive results in personal growth and social relationships. In the relevant literature 6 classes of virtues or core virtues are identified underlying 24 measurable character strengths. These positive psychological traits classified that Wisdom and Knowledge; Courage; Humanity; Justice; Temperance; Transcendence. Notwithstanding numerous cautions and caveats, these traits and virtues are suggested to be universally affirmed and approved in almost every culture, which has modern democratic codes, and contribute to the well being and happiness of individuals and communities if internalized together with universal humanitarian values (Peterson and Park, 2009). From the philosophical point of view of Positive Psychology, people are “evolutionarily predisposed” toward these virtues and characteristics. In this sense the content of the values that are conveyed to humans in the process of socialization and via education is also an indicator of the progress and democratization levels of societies. At the societal level, Positive Psychology calls attention to organizational citizenship, social responsibility, social empathy, altruism, social tolerance and business ethics. Positive experiences, positive emotions, positive traits and positive institutions are interconnected which are regarded as the three legs of Positive Psychology. The interaction between these assets is expected to work as follows: Positive traits or strengths provokes positive experiences and affects such as optimism, hope, creativity and self-sufficiency. These experiences in return have positive effects on the well being of communities and institutions. In other words the individuals, who discover their strengths and learn to use them in their interactions with people and in solving problems, experience more intense positive experiences and affects, and the resulting synergy increases the happiness and well being of institutions and societies as a whole. Although the empirical validation of this network is limited, it is promising to pursue such pattern for the future. Nevertheless, the societal aspect of positive psychology needs more

comprehension with primary focus on “positive sociology, positive leadership and positive anthropology”.

Application Fields of Positive Psychology

Positive Psychology has quite extensive fields of application in business administration, law (forensic psychology), clinical psychology, counseling, health and education. Conceptualizations like Positive Organization, Positive Law, Positive Management and Leadership and Positive Education concern about institutional and individual mechanisms that set the positive potentials of individuals into practice in order to be at their best. Thus, these conceptualizations concern about institutional and individual mechanisms including precautions that can be taken in advance as buffering against negative states as stress, depression, crime, conflict, despair, pessimism and feeling of inadequacy (Linley, Joseph, Maltby, Harrington, Wood, 2009). In this respect it is very important to highlight the proactive nature of Positive Psychology implications again which is far beyond an arbitrary attempt to nourishing “the good” but as an intentional approach of preventing the bad in future. There are a good number of research and implications underlying effects of positive interventions in different fields of which is worth mentioning but beyond the scope of this article.

Positive Education and the Emerging Leadership Role of Counseling in Schools

New quests in the philosophy and methods of educating people necessitate rethinking of some approaches – which de facto exist at schools – under a general umbrella term. This term is suggested as Positive Education. Beyond doubt, education essentially has to be positive. The core principles of positive education – that is different from the mission of the classical education – is twofold: The first principle of positive education is to create learning climate in class where individual learners should take information and creatively construct it according to their own capacities and views (Hayes, 2006; Hurlock, 1925; Muscott, Mann and LeBrun, 2008).; the second principle which is at least as crucial as the first is to promote a living climate at schools that will foster intellectual, emotional and physical “wellbeing” in students; so as to prevent the potential academic and emotional problems before they occur or reoccur (Gilman, Huebner, and Furlong, 2009; Martin, Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009; Murray, 2003;). Positive education extends the role of schools beyond academic competence to further preparing the ‘whole child’ (Huitt, 2010; Nodding, 2005). Therefore, it would appear schools have a duty of care to educate their students on wellbeing and implement interventions aimed at increasing the optimal functioning of their students, staff and community. Thus positive education has two missions reflected on the academic achievement and wellbeing of students to be embraced from a holistic perspective (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich and Linkins, 2009).

The academic mission of positive education comes in view in the context of how students learn. Positive education claims to enhance learning by creating positive emotions and experiences through deliberately designed methods in classrooms and at schools. Thus, among variety of methods that facilitates learning of students, positive psychology calls attention to the positive feelings that school and classroom climate can build. If a student is happy in the environment in which s/he obtains instructions s/he will learn easily and more permanently. The neuropsychological explanation of the relationship between positive emotions and learning lies in how information is processed in the brain. If the information is transmitted in a positive climate where students feel emotionally safe, the limbic system perceives the information as positive and prepares the individual (before the information reaches the cortex) to be motivated, to move, think and learn (Fredrickson, 2003). Thus emotion is a critical factor in learning and acts as a pathway to transform data into meaningful information. It is also known that positive feelings increase the level of mesolimbic dopamine that makes the individual learner more creative and eager (Cohn and Fredrickson, 2009) On the other hand to what extent a happiness experience or emotional mania, which is derived by mere hedonism (and that is not goal directed), can accelerate learning is a controversial issue. A happiness experience that can be effective in the sense of learning outcomes has to answer in the affirmative to the following questions:

- To what extent the learning activity and the learning climate provoke positive emotions in the student?
- To what extent does the student find the learning activity meaningful and connects with others through the learning process

To what extent can the learning activity be sustained in accord with the student's way of learning and his/her strong assets (traits) (Seligman, 2012).

In this respect, learning methods like multiple intelligences, "broaden and build" model of positive emotions, self-directed learning models (progressive and constructive methods), classroom interventions and many others that provoke positive emotions in students (empathy, praise and rewarding, humor etc.) May enhance learning when they are applied in the holistic view of positive psychology.

Well being mission of positive education on the other hand addresses to those initiatives and practices sustained by the school to secure healthy and optimal functioning of its members out of classroom settings. This process also gives students a sense of belongingness as a hallmark for emotional safety.

In the systematic sense a reference model about positive education and positive schools should contain the following parameters (JCSH, 2008)

- The social and physical environment of schools (the detailed descriptions of physical and emotional environment in which students teachers and other staff feel physically and emotionally safe).
- Teaching and learning strategies (the expansion of applications which is based on students' positive traits to be manifested in their learning activities and in which the education curriculum is integrated with constructive and progressive methods)
- Relations with stakeholders (The school-family cooperation, family trainings about Positive Psychology mentorship programs among students, establishment of the student-family interaction places in accordance with PP principles)
- School policies (the expansion or reorganization of the school policies, discipline and counseling regulations that will support and follow every step of positive psychology applications).

The counselor's role in positive education

Positive psychology brings about a paradigm shift in school psychology, which paved way to the emergence of leadership roles for the school counselors. Along with their traditional roles the new focus of the counselors is now on promoting students' strengths and strength-enhancing environments. The target groups for the counselors are the whole students population rather than those with problems, as this new role requires a more proactive mode of functioning and serving a more large number of students. The elaboration of strength-based counseling addresses to six guiding principles (Galassi & Akos, 2004; 2007; Smith, 2006).

- Promote cultural and context-based development for all students: School counselors should be culture sensitive as such should acknowledge and seek to incorporate contextual factors (culture) in their efforts to facilitate positive development for all students.
- Promote evidence-based individual student strengths: Strengths-enhancing environments are associated with positive youth development; therefore, an important function of the school counselor is to actively promote these types of environments through leadership, collaboration, advocacy and other system-level interventions. Career academies established by the counselors at schools or bulding partnerships with the employers could be examples of enhanced environments where students have chances to find out and manifest their strong assets. Collaboration with the teachers for students to use their strenghts in

problem solving and learning experiences in class could be of another advocacy role of counselors.

- Emphasize strengths promotion over problem reduction and problem prevention: The new mission of school counselors allows them to assume a more proactive role- rather than a reactive mode of functioning- and serve a much larger number of students by focusing on problem prevention and remediation. By teaching students early how to self-regulate (setting higher goals, increased awareness about self-efficacy e.g.) school counselors take a proactive role in enabling students to succeed in the classroom.
- Emphasize evidence-based interventions and practice: Adhering to the premise that research knowledge provides the most reliable source of guidance in determining appropriate and effective interventions, the strengths-oriented school counselor is committed to evidence-based and research informed practice. Thereof school counselors are highly encouraged to utilize research in academic journals publications put forth by professional organizations and other reputable online resources to inform and update their interventions and programs.
- Emphasize promotion-oriented developmental advocacy at the school level: In Strengths-Based School Counseling, school counselor's advocacy efforts will focus primarily on lobbying for system policies and environments that enhance development for all students and secondarily on identifying and removing barriers. The school counselor's advocacy is concerned with assuring access, equity, and educational justice for all students, with a primary focus on the school or school system.

As reflected on these principles the role of counselors in positive education is transformed to nurturing and enhancing empirically-identified and culturally relevant student strengths or competencies rather than focusing on student weaknesses and problem areas. In order to employ and sustain academic, personal/social and career development of students, strengths-based school counselors employ a variety of direct (e.g., counseling, classroom guidance) and systemic (e.g., consultation, advocacy) level interventions. The strengths-based perspective identifies the counselor as a school leader who collaborates with primarily principals, students, teachers, parents, and other members of the community and promotes strengths-enhancing environments for all students.

Barriers to sustain the leadership roles of counselors

Applicability of the leadership roles of counselors remains disputable due to some conventional mindsets still lurk in educational systems: Many administrators and teachers have trouble viewing school counselors as leaders because traditionally they have not been expected to be leaders at schools; as many roles of school counselors are shaped by the school principals irrelevant duties may take them away from the tasks and roles for which they were trained; their professional status at schools may not be ranked as high as to pioneer a leadership role among the other employees; older school counselors are seen as more credible in partnering and promoting leadership practices as co-equals (McMahon and Mason, 2009; Wingfield, Reese and Olatunji, 2010). School counselors can overcome these barriers by evidence based and accountable counseling services accompanied with rigor knowledge, awareness

and problem solving skills in different aspects of positive education; an elevated inner belief that their roles as leaders and advocates are valuable to form bonds between the school, family and community which is vital for the sustainability of positive education; a sense of collaboration between the school administrators, teachers and school counselors which would allow school counselors to engage in leadership roles that would not overlap with the leadership roles of other parties; an independent evaluation model for the counselors to free them from the power dynamics impeding their advocacy roles; and support of national policies to legitimize this role transformation at schools.

Needless to say both efficiency and effectiveness of positive education is not free of environmental context. Figure 1 indicates the interaction between the elements of eco systems and meso and micro levels of positive education. National culture, heritage, community ethics and state policies constitute eco system, which will affect meso (indicators of positive education at school level) and micro (indicators of positive psychology at individual levels) levels of positive psychology. Meso and micro level outcomes of positive psychology on the other hand are expected to initially effect immediate environment and then eco systems in the long run. Meso level strategies of positive psychology designed with the basic philosophy and principles of the movement promote micro level outcomes that pave way to well being of communities. School counselors are the change agents in the model utilizes rigor theory and measurement as shown in the model in collaboration with the other agents; but have the primer responsibility of training, informing and consulting with teachers, administrators, family and community members as well as students to upgrade positive psychology implementations. They are expected to take up a key role along with the principals and managers to initiate and sustain the philosophy and principles of positive education among the stakeholders of the education system.

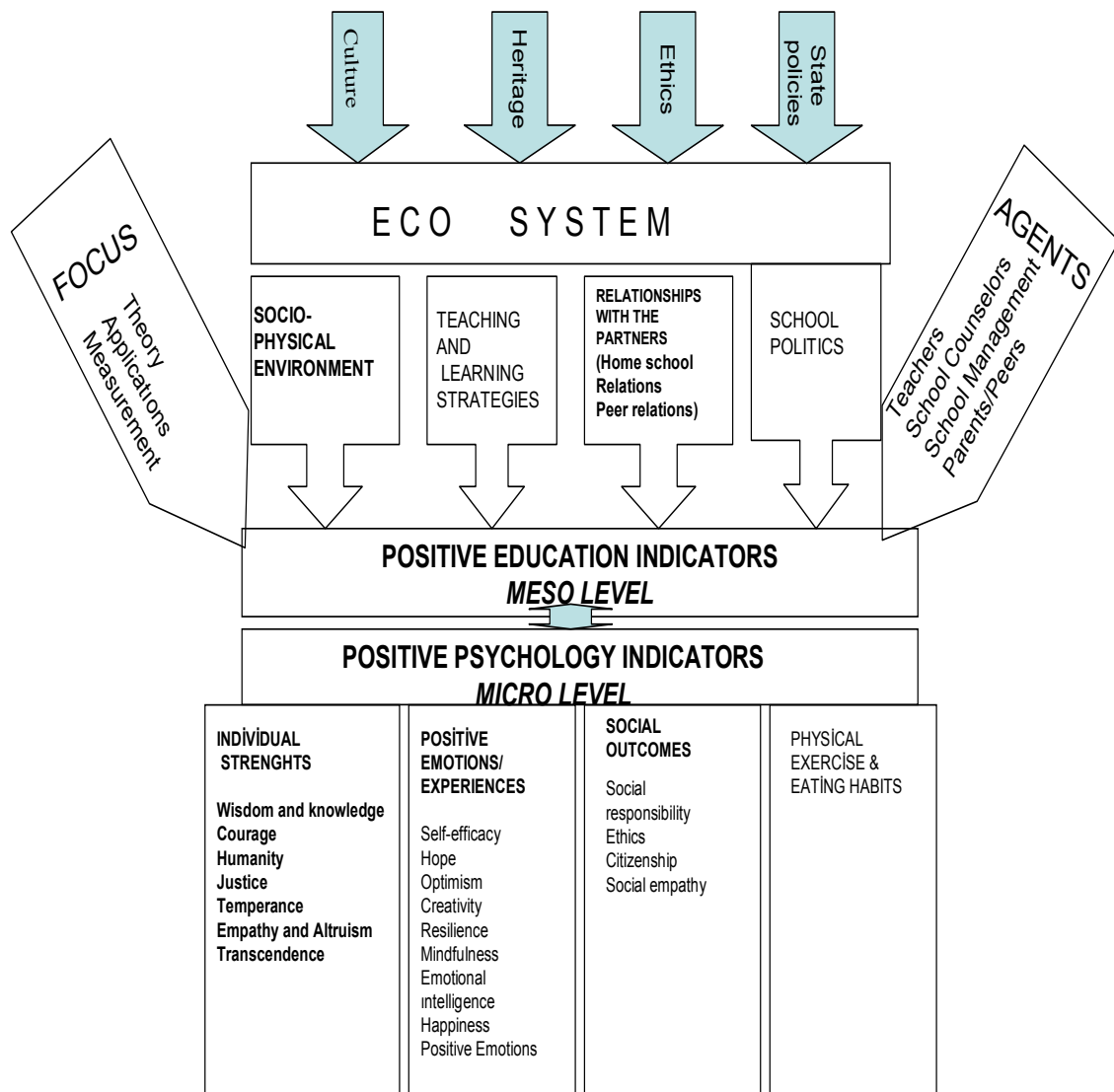


Figure 1. A Proposed Model For Positive education

Consequently positive psychology integrated in education seems to be a new hope – if not the last – to enhance individual and societal well-being. Positive emotions and positive traits believed to be thought at schools with educational intervention programs, teaching methods and pervasive counseling practices at schools. Positive institutions such as democracy, strong families, good schools seem to be the results of such education process.

Positive Psychology and Positive Education have some drawbacks in their scientific effort of increasing knowledge and interventions of “what makes life worth living”. Kristjansson (2012) article addressing to a metaphor “Old Wine in New Bottles” is quite engrossing but optimistic study underlying some of these issues that needs clarification in

theory and practice of positive psychology and education. Although the elaboration of these issues is beyond the scope of this article it is important to note that she reframes whether or not the concepts and intervention programs of positive psychology/ education are recycled or retooled they scientifically proved well enough, their mission has not been in vain.

In spite of all accumulation of empirical evidence that positive psychology makes individuals happier and more successful at schools the agenda of mainstream educational psychology does not seem to totally shift yet; nevertheless it is promising to see schools in many countries are heading in the direction of positive psychology. Obviously the effectiveness of implications depends on the competencies and devotions of the change agents each of whom work and act as leaders incorporating their efforts into realization of a dream, positive education!

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